

TESTIMONY OF CHARLES SCOTT HOWARD
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & LABOR
Hearing on “Protecting the Health and Safety of America’s
Mine Workers”

My name is Charles Scott Howard and as I have said before I am a South Eastern Kentucky Coal Miner. I am not a hillbilly, I am a mountain man forged from an ancestry of hardworking men and women who wake up or did wake up day after day to survive. I was raised to believe not only in God and his Word, but that there is a standard for a man; to work, to take care of family, respect others and to stand up for your rights. I never dreamed of being a coal miner when I was growing up but my family ended up back in Eastern Kentucky when I was in the 7th grade and the best chance of a decent wage was to be a coal miner, but I didn't want to mine coal for I had watched my grandfather suffer from his days in the mines, he lived a bad life because of what the mines did to him and after they pulled him out of the mines it took him about 30 years to die and his quality of life for these years was not much.

In the winter of 1979 I started my career in the coal industry and still mine coal today.

I started working on what they called a Wilcox Section. It consisted of a small miner that was propelled into the coal by two winches mounted on each side and a man would hook a jack onto the end of a rope and wedge the jack between the roof and floor of the mine and the winches would pull the augers into the coal and a conveyor chain would take the coal down the middle of the mine and dump it into another conveyor chain of a bridge connected to the miner and to another bridge and then to a conveyor belt that would continue on in a series of belt lines to the surface. The Wilcox mines were called Man killers for they were a cheap mine made to extract seams of coal as low as 24-25 inches. All the motors on the miners had fans to keep them cool so there was no need for water. On other miners water was needed to cool the motors and the water was then sprayed onto the coal being cut as it left the motors thus suppressing the fine dust made as coal is cut, so that meant that a Wilcox man would breath all this dust for no water was needed. I can remember breathing so much dust that my nostrils would completely stop up with dust and the back of my throat and tongue would be caked with coal dust and you would swallow so much dust your stomach would burn like fire from the sulfur and iron pyrite that filled you up and you would cough and hack till you puked. The dust was so thick that you could not see your partner 4 foot away who would be setting timbers if he had any which was used as a sole means of supporting the roof. Your eyelids would collect so much dust that the grit would keep your eyes red and so sore and when you bathed, the dusts rings around your eyes made you look like you had eyeliner on. With your back against the roof and your hands and knees ambulating you around as you done your duties the loud noise from the miner and bridges, up to 20 decibels, deafened you as you wore out your back and knees. The steel ropes that pulled this monster around that you hoped wouldn't crush you if it decided to walk would splinter and when you had to grab the rope to pull off another length the strands would pierce into your fingers and hands keeping them sore and infected. I remember my mom looking at my hands and crying. I worked on Wilcox sections about 7 ½ years before I

escaped them to a better form of mining but not before receiving my first stages of Black Lung and injuries to my joints and not before seeing many of my fellow workers crippled up and hearing of others being killed in other Wilcox mines in other areas. I thanked God I had escaped this form of mining called man killers with my life.

A solid section was the next kind of mine I worked at. This kind of mining is very old. You simply drill holes into the face of the coal in a certain angle and fill them full of explosives. The explosion forces the coal out into the entries and this is scooped up and taken to a feeder that pours the coal onto a conveyor belt that carries the coal to the surface. After a place is cleaned up of the coal that has been shot down, a bolter comes in and drills holes in the top on four foot centers and places roof bolts into them to support the roof from collapsing. Then the process of drilling starts again. This seems simple doesn't it, but there are things to be done to make this form of mining safe. When a hole is drilled the first stick of power to be placed in the hole is the cap stick which is a stick of powder with a blasting cap in it. The purpose in this is to ensure that the blasting cap will set off every stick of powder placed in the hole. This was not done because the caps would be ordered with different lengths of wire to ensure they reached the end of the hole to be wired up to detonate. This practice was not done; the operator ordered shorter cap wires because they were cheaper so we had to put the cap in the last stick put into the hole. Usually every stick still went off but you are still gambling on whether they will or not. The last thing to go into the hole was a length of stemming we called dummies. This was done to suppress the flame produced when the explosion was set off. You guessed it right. We didn't use dummies to save cost for the operator, which I might add was a very small savings. I worked the graveyard shift at that mines and we were sent to this section to work usually without a boss so no air readings or methane checks were made. One day a mine inspector made this section and found 8% methane, this is a very high amount being that 10% provides for the most violent explosion. The operator was forced to buy a cutting machine so that the minimum amount of explosives was used to separate the coal from the seams. I quit this place when I found out the dangers we had been working in and again thanked God for sparing my life again.

Another kind of mines I've worked at used continuous miners. These miners are on track similar to a bulldozer and has a cylinder on one end filled with carbon tipped bits to cut the coal and a scoop type pan that gathers the coal and a conveyor chain carries it thru the middle of this machine and dumps out the other end into a form of haulage that takes the coal to a conveyor belt and then to the surface. This form of mining produces more coal than anything I have ever worked around. It also produces a lot more dust.

I still work at mines that use continuous miners today and I guess I'll finish my career at these kinds of mines.

I could tell you mining stories for hours but I've told these few to try to let you see first hand from a coal miner the issues we face each day in the mines. Safety is a huge responsibility. The industry must be held responsible for they have all the power and authority to see that safety comes first.

Black Lung is still a big problem, compensation is still a big problem and the inspectors and government that regulates mining is a big problem. The problem is the coal industry has put forth too much money to hide the truth.